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Mr Lee Nixon
Principal
Stoke Studio College for Manufacturing and Design Engineering
Moorland Road
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Dear Mr Nixon

Requires improvement: monitoring inspection visit to Stoke Studio College for Manufacturing and Design Engineering

Following my visit to your college on 22 March 2016, I write on behalf of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills to report the inspection findings. Thank you for the help you gave me and for the time you made available to discuss the actions you are taking to improve the college since the most recent section 5 inspection.

The visit was the first monitoring inspection since the college was judged to require improvement following the section 5 inspection in June 2015. It was carried out under section 8 of the Education Act 2005.

Senior leaders and governors are taking effective action to tackle the areas requiring improvement identified at the recent section 5 inspection in order to become a good school.

The college should take further action to:

- ensure that the college's improvement plan has a sharp focus on evaluating the impact of current actions in order to inform next steps
- embed systems and structures which are leading to improvements.

Evidence

During the inspection, meetings were held with the principal, the director of teaching and learning, other leaders, the chair of the governing body and representatives of the sponsor, including the chief executive, to discuss the actions taken since the last inspection. College documentation, including the improvement plan and information about safeguarding, was evaluated and short visits were made to a classroom and the technology hub.

Context

The executive principal left the organisation in December 2015 and the former vice-principal is now the principal of the college and Stoke Studio College for Construction & Building Excellence. Both studio colleges remain part of the College Academies Trust and the principal is now directly line managed by the chief executive of the trust. The director of engineering now has wider responsibilities as the director of teaching and learning. This role includes the leadership of sixth form provision.

One member of the teaching staff left last term and a new engineering lecturer will join in May 2016. This post is currently being covered by a long-term supply teacher.

Main findings

Leaders have a clear understanding of the strengths and areas for development within the college. The 'rapid improvement plan' covers all the areas for improvement identified at the time of the last section 5 inspection and contains relevant, timely and specific actions in order to address these weaknesses. Actions are logically sequenced and it is clear who is responsible for leading them. However, the process of evaluating the impact of these actions is not outlined precisely in the plan, so it is not clear how further action will be informed.

Leadership across the college has been strengthened by the close monitoring of all aspects of the college's work. For example, leaders now use more rigorous information, which is collected regularly, to take effective action to improve teaching and accelerate learning. Actions are having a positive impact but many are relatively recent so they are not yet fully embedded.

Leaders have improved the quality of teaching by ensuring that planning, students' work, progress information and lesson observations are monitored closely to inform action to improve practice. Staff benefit from a range of professional development opportunities provided within the trust and beyond. They observe best practice, receive coaching and attend targeted training. The positive impact of training on how to use questioning effectively was observed during the short visits to lessons during this inspection. Staff were using effective questions to probe students' understanding.

Planning has improved since the last inspection. Staff take into account what students already know to challenge them to make improved progress. Staff now routinely use information about prior learning in order to plan activities for students of different abilities. Students are also given regular feedback about their work. As written and verbal feedback is usually of a high quality, linked to assessment criteria, students know exactly what they need to do to improve. Also, as they are given time to respond to this feedback, it is having a positive impact on progress.

Regular and robust tracking of progress in the college now enables leaders to act quickly to prevent any students from falling behind. Information about achievement is moderated, collected regularly and used to analyse the progress of individuals and groups. The system to track progress quickly identifies if a student is not on course to meet their aspirational targets and this leads to swift and appropriate intervention. Slow progress is identified in regular meetings about learning in different subject areas and in coaching sessions with individuals. This improved system to track and monitor progress is helping to improve achievement in the college.

The breadth of activities that supplement students' academic work in the sixth form has been improved. Students have the opportunity to take part in a range of sporting and enrichment activities and personal, health and social education lessons and 'big tutorials' help sixth formers to understand how to keep themselves safe and well. Topics such as sexual health, drug and alcohol awareness, preventing extremism, e-safety and bullying are all covered through the curriculum and healthy eating is promoted through the college canteen.

Leaders have developed the quality and range of work experience opportunities available to all students. Sixth formers have at least one day a week on work experience, which includes a minimum of six weeks a year at a provider in the manufacturing and design engineering sector. Key stage 4 students take part in work experience for two weeks each term. All placements are now linked to the courses that students are studying. They are either in the sector or, if they are in other workplaces, they are developing important employability skills.

Governance of the college is strong. Governors have the skills, knowledge and understanding to hold leaders to close account and they have attended a range of appropriate training to ensure that they can continue to offer appropriate support and challenge.

External support

The College Academies Trust offers a range of effective support. Within an overview of the trust's provision, they have a clear understanding of the college's strengths and areas for development. Consequently, they are able to broker high-quality support from within the trust and beyond. For example, they have commissioned an improvement partner, delivered training for staff and provided practical support

through their human resources, information technology (IT) and finance staff. In addition, the trust has sourced placements for work experience, facilitated the 'big tutorials' for students across the provision and offered enrichment activities to sixth formers.

I am copying this letter to the chair of the governing body, the chief executive of the College Academies Trust, the regional colleges commissioner and the executive director of people, Stoke-on-Trent City Council. This letter will be published on the Ofsted website.

Yours sincerely

Simon Mosley

Her Majesty's Inspector